



## King's Research Portal

DOI:

[10.1080/17450918.2019.1640275](https://doi.org/10.1080/17450918.2019.1640275)

*Document Version*

Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication record in King's Research Portal](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Lewis, S., & Whipday, E. (2019). Sounding Offstage Worlds: Experiencing Liminal Space and Time in Macbeth and Othello. *Shakespeare*, 15(3), 272-282 . <https://doi.org/10.1080/17450918.2019.1640275>

### **Citing this paper**

Please note that where the full-text provided on King's Research Portal is the Author Accepted Manuscript or Post-Print version this may differ from the final Published version. If citing, it is advised that you check and use the publisher's definitive version for pagination, volume/issue, and date of publication details. And where the final published version is provided on the Research Portal, if citing you are again advised to check the publisher's website for any subsequent corrections.

### **General rights**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the Research Portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognize and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the Research Portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the Research Portal

### **Take down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact [librarypure@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:librarypure@kcl.ac.uk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

**Sounding Offstage Worlds:  
Experiencing Liminal Space and Time in *Macbeth* and *Othello***

MACBETH: Whence is that knocking? (2.2.55)

OTHELLO: What noise is this? (5.2.95)

Othello and Macbeth are both disturbed by offstage sounds – calling and knocking – during or in the immediate aftermath of the murders they perform. In his 1823 essay ‘On the knocking at the gate in *Macbeth*’, Thomas De Quincey muses on his disturbed reaction to that play, writing that ‘[t]he knocking at the gate which succeeds to the murder of Duncan produced to my feelings an effect for which I never could account ... it reflected back upon the murderer a peculiar awfulness and a depth of solemnity’ (389). As De Quincey makes clear, an offstage sound effect can alter an audience member’s sense of the onstage world; disembodied sounds can shape our affective experience of the play’s characters and their actions.

De Quincey describes the knocking which stimulates his puzzling emotional response as working to disrupt the sense of suspended unreality that has been created in the preceding moments. He suggests the action that takes place just before the knocking (the murder itself which happens offstage, and the Macbeths’ fraught exchange onstage which immediately follows), as existing in temporal isolation:

the world of ordinary life is suddenly arrested, laid asleep, tranced, racked into a dread armistice; time must be annihilated, relation to things without abolished; and all must pass self-withdrawn into a deep syncope and suspension of earthly passion (393).

This visceral sense of temporal caesura enables the audience to understand that ‘[a]nother world has stepped in’, one in which murder is possible (393). For De Quincey, this state of abeyance is also spatial, as the castle seems to become at once adrift and inviolable. The murderers and the murdered are ‘sequestered in some deep recess’, spatially as well as temporally distinct and distant from both the quotidian world of the castle, and from Scotland beyond (393). For De Quincey, this troublingly intimate bubble is burst with the knocking at the end of the scene, which extracts the audience

and the Macbeths from the insulated world of their crime, and returns them to the ‘real’ world of the play, in which the consequences of their murderous actions must be faced.

Developing De Quincey’s ideas, we argue that the knocking in *Macbeth* potentially removes the audience from the spatially and temporally isolated play-world by drawing their attention to the space and time of their own world, meta-theatrically leading them to think about both the architecture of the theatre and the duration of the theatrical performance. In this play, as in many others, the audience are led to ponder the location and source of the offstage sound, and in the moment of the knocking they may be just as likely to envisage the tiring house as they are to imagine another part of the castle. Furthermore, the knocking is a stark reminder of the temporal framework that defines the theatrical experience. The audience and the Macbeths come out of their trance-like state in this scene in a way which foreshadows the awakening of the actors and audience members at the end of the performance, when they must leave behind the fiction of the play-world and return to their own individual realities.

While the knocking in *Macbeth* works to disrupt space and time following the murder of Duncan, Emilia’s offstage calling in 5.2 of *Othello* works to both interrupt the moment of the murder, and, as we shall see, drive the audience and Othello toward the completion of that protracted moment. Emilia’s repeated calls of ‘My lord!’ from outside the bedchamber door reinforce the extent to which the marriage between Desdemona and Othello is embedded in wider societal and household hierarchies, in the same way that the secrecy that enables the Macbeths’ murderous actions is disturbed by the knocking at the gate, which works to refocus our attention on the broader contexts for Duncan’s murder (5.2.94). In attempting to lock the marital bedchamber against the outside world to attain the privacy that will enable him to murder his wife, Othello becomes vulnerable to an aural intrusion that disrupts the sealed space of domestic violence and of male authority. Emilia’s calls simultaneously disturb Othello in the act of murder, and reinforce his sense that he must complete this act before opening the door and making possible the discovery of his crime: her calls are therefore simultaneously both irritating delays to, and potential catalysts for, Desdemona’s demise. Through the spatial and temporal disruption that is brought about by Emilia’s calling, the play can lead the audience to become complicit with Othello. However, as we shall see, in the moment of suspense and anticipation in which the audience are most deeply invested in the play, this troubling complicity actually disrupts their experience of the fictional world.

This essay will explore the offstage calling in *Othello* in relation to the offstage knocking in *Macbeth*. We are interested in the dramaturgical significance of the call as opposed to the knock; and in how both sets of offstage sounds can mediate an audience's experience of time and space in offstage and onstage worlds. We suggest that the spatial and temporal boundaries between play world and real world are in fact disrupted and complicated by these sounds, which simultaneously bring audience members closer to the action of the play and yet also force them to register a critical distance from the play-worlds within which they are immersed.

Our work in this essay draws on the findings of our 'Research in Action' workshop, 'Sounding Offstage Worlds', which we ran at the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse in 2016. The workshop was facilitated by Will Tosh, directed by Philip Bird, and supported by Globe Education and the King's College London English Department. The central objective of this ongoing series of workshops is to explore the material conditions of performance in Jacobean indoor playhouses. We analysed scenes from *Othello*, *Macbeth*, *The Atheist's Tragedy*, and *The Duchess of Malfi*, with the aim of examining the creation of offstage worlds through the use of non-musical sounds produced by the theatrical architecture and actors' bodies and voices, particularly echoes, knocks, and calls. We designed the session to explore the ways in which the offstage soundscapes generated and sustained by these effects shape the actors' and audience's experiences of onstage space and time, and we presented four key scenes from these plays in which actors and audience members are surprised by the intrusion of a sudden offstage sound.

We gathered actor and audience feedback during and after our workshop, both through transcribing verbal responses, and through asking audience members to complete a questionnaire on their experience immediately following the workshop. As Stephen Purcell has observed in his use of questionnaires to gauge audience responses to Tim Crouch's *I, Malvolio*, this methodology requires us to assume 'that what audiences write is an accurate gauge of what they actually felt'; and as Purcell puts it, 'while this may be a problematic assumption, it is also a necessary one' (2013: 17). We also followed Purcell in avoiding multiple-choice and quantitative questions, leaving audience members space for lengthy, personal, or unexpected responses, and in collecting 'raw and immediate' responses. Our audience was composed of both academics and members of the general public.

In incorporating our findings from this ‘Research in Action’ workshop into our work on sounding offstage worlds, we do not aim to use ‘practice as research’ to test pragmatic considerations of the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse, such as the timbre or exact location of the knocking or calling. Nor do we aim to explore the aural properties of specific theatres; the sound effects of *Othello* and *Macbeth* are dramaturgically flexible, able to move between the Globe, the Banqueting Hall at Hampton Court Palace (where what may have been the first performance of *Macbeth* took place before James I and Christian IV of Denmark), and Corpus Christi College in Oxford (where Henry Jackson recorded seeing *Othello* performed in 1610). Rather, this essay seeks to explore how our close readings of space and time in these scenes could be developed by using the space of the indoor playhouse to test our research through action, situating the text itself – and thus, our analysis of it – in space and time. In so doing, we aim to create a form of theatrically-informed close reading that complements our archival research and text-based readings in approaching these scenes; we are tracing, as Purcell puts it, ‘plurality rather than fixity, possibility rather than fact’ (2017: 439). This is therefore not an essay on the possibilities (and limitations) of practice as research as an approach to early modern drama, which has been discussed elsewhere; rather, we use practice as research alongside archival research and close reading, as complementary approaches to the dramaturgical and literary questions we explore.<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Sounding Offstage Worlds

Bruce Smith opens *The Acoustic World in Early Modern England* by asking the reader to make the sound ‘oh’. He suggests that we can think about this ‘oh’ as at once ‘a physical act’, ‘a sensory experience’, ‘an act of communication’, and ‘a political performance’ (3). We can apply these four categories when thinking about the performance of non-musical sound as offstage sound effects. The knocking at the gates in *Macbeth* is, as Arthur Colby Sprague observed in his 1945 article on offstage sounds, ‘the most famous offstage sound in all drama’ (73). The knock is a physical act, performed offstage by an actor’s body; the actor does not yet need to be in character, and the actor who knocks does not need to be the actor playing the character who is

---

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Purcell; Dustagheer, Jones, and Rycroft; Menzer; Kesson.

understood to be the knocker within the world of the play (or indeed, to be an actor at all). An offstage knock is therefore inherently meta-theatrical, as it draws attention to the indeterminacy of the performer's identity, prior to his entry to the stage space.

As an act of communication, the knock communicates surprisingly little – only that there is a person on the outside of the door, who desires the attention of someone on the inside of the door. As a sound effect, it is therefore associated with suspense; the pace, rhythm, and volume might temper the effect of the knock, but the identity and purpose of the knocker remain opaque. As a result, it affects the time of the onstage world, creating a sense of anticipation and delay in the moments (prolonged or otherwise) between the question implied by the knock, and the answer supplied by the revelation of the knocker.

The knock also affects the space of the onstage world, and how we imagine the space of the world beyond the stage door. It suggests the desire for entry, drawing attention to the threshold as threshold, between onstage and offstage world and between the fictional place portrayed onstage and the adjacent spaces of the world beyond. It is a political act which itself draws attention to the politics of the onstage space – who controls the threshold, and how do they respond to the attempted intervention in the spatial (and aural) dynamics of the space? Yet it is, in the moment of the knock, a political act without a knowable agent. The knock implies the question Macbeth asks – ‘Whence is that knocking?’ – as well as the question he does not: ‘Whom is that knocker?’

This may be the root of what Bruce Smith calls ‘the sound’s appalling effect, in its disassociation from its source’; the knock implies an interaction between an unseen body, and the unseen dimension of a visible object: the other side of the door (179). This collision between what is known and visible (the door) and what is unknown and invisible (the knocker) creates a sense of the intrusion of the unknowable offstage world into the visible onstage space. In *Macbeth*, this is doubled by the awareness that another door leads to another unknowable (and terrible) offstage world: the space where Duncan’s body lies.

An offstage sound effect produced by the voice of an offstage actor has different implications. The call is a physical act, performed offstage by the body of the (boy) actor in character as Emilia. As a significant character who was present in the preceding

scene, it is probable that we will recognise her voice (as performed by his voice).<sup>2</sup> It is an aural sensory experience mediated by an awareness that it comes from the other side of the door, from somewhere beyond the time and space of Othello and Desdemona's bedchamber, and potentially, beyond the play world itself: the actor is speaking in character, but is not yet seen to be in character. It comes from the threshold space, at once within and without the world of the play. The call is an act of communication by Emilia, who aims to get Othello's attention; and it is a political act, because it is an act by which she disrupts the spatial hierarchies of Othello's household. Othello, as her master, has bidden her to leave and lock the door, asserting the (temporary) privacy and seclusion of the marital bedchamber. In calling at the door, Emilia disturbs this privacy and seclusion, and explicitly disobeys his commands. However, by calling rather than knocking, Emilia both makes herself known – she expects Othello to recognise her voice, and therefore to open the door – and makes it clear that she is addressing Othello ('My lord!'), and not her mistress, therefore reinforcing the household hierarchy even as she disrupts it. Yet in the disorienting moment of murder, Othello can recognise neither her voice nor her mode of address: 'What noise is this?', he asks, in the third reiteration of this question in the play, following Cassio's reaction ('What noise?') to the cry within of 'A sail', and Iago's disingenuous response ('But hark, what noise?') to the implied but unspecified cries of Roderigo following Cassio's attack (2.1.53-3, 2.3.138). In each of these cases, the 'noise' that the auditor cannot locate, define or make sense of, is the human voice, positioned somehow in between offstage and onstage worlds. These are literally (dis)embodied examples, then, of the play's wider concern with deceptive and misleading voices, and the ways in which those voices mediate relationships between those of different genders, regionalities, ethnicities, and social statuses.

Emilia insistently continues her calling until her voice is recognized: "'Tis Emilia' (5.2.90). In foregrounding the disruptive potential of the female voice, Emilia's calls remind the audience of Desdemona's use of song in the previous scene, in which her performance of the familiar 'Willow song' became what Simon Smith terms a moment of 'tragic ... self-presentation' to the audience, foreshadowing her own death (140). As we shall explore, the characters of Emilia and Desdemona potentially become indistinguishable in this scene, merging in both Othello and the audience's minds. As a political act, then, Emilia's offstage calling also foreshadows her tragically disruptive

---

<sup>2</sup> On the aural relationship between boy actor's voices and women's voices, see Bruce Smith, pp.226-229.

onstage speech in which she accuses her husband later in the scene, and therefore exists in relation to the onstage soundscape of tragic female voices in the play, ultimately working to draw attention to the gendered hierarchies so at issue in *Othello* and in early modern society more broadly.

Knocking or calling at doors were presumably quotidian domestic activities, but as theatrical events, they force the audience to confront the interconnectedness of the inhabited onstage space and an offstage world that is populated by the unknown but audible, and whose dimensions and features can only be imagined. As Beliz Güçbilmez puts it, when an offstage sound is heard, ‘the presence of the offstage becomes impossible to ignore ... one experiences a shift in the focus of reception: the auditory dimension replaces the obligatory visual aspect of theatre’ (155). We suggest that this shift in focus is at once a spatial and a temporal one. The acknowledgement of the existence of the offstage world implies a spatial reconfiguration, which situates the stage space in relation not only to the audience, but to the imagined places behind, beyond, or within – a relation that is also called to mind by entrances, exits, and onstage references to the world outside. Furthermore, these sounds suggest the possibility of boundary crossing: when an offstage sound crosses the boundary into the onstage world, it suggests the possibility that the body that produced the sound may follow. This possibility is reinforced when the sound effect itself implies the desire for entry. With an offstage knock, the spatial reconfiguration therefore has temporal implications. The offstage sound draws the audience’s attention to the (potentially suspenseful) time between the sound itself, and the entry it may (or may not) signal.

## **2. Delay and Complicity: Knocking at the Gates in *Macbeth***

De Quincey suggests that in the immediate aftermath of the murder, the ‘murderers and the murder must be insulated – cut off by an immeasurable gulf from the ordinary tide and succession of human affairs’ (393). The audience are estranged, with the Macbeths, from the time of day; we wake while the castle sleeps, implicated in Macbeth’s pronouncement that the ‘house’ shall ‘sleep no more’ (2.2.39). Time is at once paused and ‘annihilated’ (393), as the everyday rhythms of the house disappear. While the temporal boundaries between night and day seem confused or undone by the crime, spatial boundaries, at first, seem to be reinforced. The scene features repeated references



to the offstage spaces of the castle: 'The doors are open' in the chamber where Duncan lies murdered; Macbeth has 'descended' to the room that he and Lady Macbeth now inhabit; Donaldbain 'lies i'th' second chamber' where 'two lodged together' (2.2.5, 16, 17, 23). Yet this specificity soon begins to collapse under the weight of the murder's concealment – Macbeth must 'Go get some water' from an unspecified location, the daggers have been brought from 'the place' and 'must lie there', in the unnamed chamber where Duncan's body is concealed; *Macbeth* will 'go [there] no more', so that the room itself disappears from verbal utterance (2.2.44, 46, 47, 48).

When Macbeth first hears the knock, he fails even to comprehend its source:

Whence is that knocking?  
How is't with me, when every noise appals me?  
What hands are here? Ha, they pluck out mine eyes! (2.2.55-57)

In contrast, Lady Macbeth returns to her earlier sense of spatial specificity: she quickly makes sense of the location of the knocking (allowing us to map it onto the imagined offstage spaces) and of its necessary consequences:

*Knock within*  
I hear a knocking  
At the south entry. Retire we to our chamber.  
A little water clears us of this deed.  
How easy is it then! Your constancy  
Hath left you unattended.  
*Knock within*  
Hark, more knocking.  
Get on your nightgown, lest occasion call us  
And show us to be watchers. (2.2.63-69)

Lady Macbeth makes an explicit link between the knock and the potential for discovery, suggesting both that the blood must be cleared, and that they must establish their alibi (that of sleep). The audience, who hear the knocking along with the Macbeths, are therefore offered two distinct models of interpretation: the noise is either appalling because it is inexplicable, and cannot be located, or because it is traceable, explicable, and a prelude to discovery.

This discovery takes place in the very next scene, as the knocking facilitates a spatial shift between the interior space of the castle that the Macbeths inhabit in 2.2, and the south entry, where we find the Porter in 2.3. The spatial trajectory of the stage space

has reversed. In 2.2, at least one of the stage doors leads further into the castle; in 2.3, one of the doors must lead to the world beyond its walls:

*Enter a PORTER. Knocking within.*

PORTER: Here's a knocking indeed! If a man were porter of hell gate he should have old turning the key.

*Knock within*

Knock, knock, knock. Who's there, i'th' name of Beelzebub? (2.3.1-4)

As Tim Fitzpatrick argues, the transition of the sound effect from distant and general to local and particular is 'a major signifier of the spatial shift that has occurred'; the appalling, disassociated knock becomes a knock on a visible door that is about to open to reveal the knocker (68).

The knocking at the gates facilitates the transition between 2.2 and 2.3, between the undefined space inside the castle where the Macbeths discuss the murder, and the 'south entry' conjectured as the source of the knocking by Lady Macbeth; what can be seen onstage therefore becomes the liminal space between two thresholds, between the door that leads to Duncan's bedchamber, and the gate that leads to the outside world (see Whipday). These spatial thresholds map onto temporal thresholds: the everyday time of the outside world, which enables Macduff to call early and 'timely', without having 'slipp'd the hour'; the delayed onstage time, with the suspenseful waiting of Lady Macbeth for the deed to occur and lateness of the Porter; and the collapsed time of the murder itself, which takes place between Macduff's exit at the sound of the bell, and the end of Lady Macbeth's eight-line soliloquy at the top of the following scene, in which she narrates the time (and the drugging of the guards) that has already occurred offstage (2.3.45-46). The knock does not only bridge the spaces of these two scenes, it also causes the three temporalities – that of the interior offstage, the exterior offstage, and the onstage world – to collide.<sup>3</sup>

The strange ethereality of time and place in 2.2 in which Macbeth is 'about it' in the dark castle, works to make the murder of Duncan somehow unreal, because it is as yet unrevealed (2.2.4). But the threat of discovery pervades, and as a result, it is in these tense moments, as we await the discovery of the king's body, that the audience is most

---

<sup>3</sup> On time in *Macbeth*, see Luisa Guj, 'Macbeth and the Seeds of Time', *Shakespeare Studies* 18 (1986): 175-188, Howard Marchitello, 'Speed and the Problem of Real Time in Macbeth', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 64.4 (Winter 2013): 425-448, and Donald W. Foster, 'Macbeth's War on Time', *English Literary Renaissance* 16.2 (Spring 1986): 319-342.

firmly affiliated with the murderers themselves, and intimately conscious of their motivations and fears. This pause in the normal passage of time which defines and somehow enables the couple's actions, must also be experienced by audience members if they are to achieve insight into the Macbeths' murderous minds; as De Quincey puts it, their 'passion, - jealousy, ambition, vengeance, [and] hatred' (392). Paradoxically, this otherworldliness of time and space means we are perhaps, in these moments, most deeply embedded in the time and space that defines the play world.

With the knock, however, we shift from the temporal and spatial caesura of the murder to the suspenseful time that must exist between the knock and the (attempted) entrance that the knock implies. The knock has the potential to violate our embeddedness, drawing meta-theatrical attention to the architecture that has produced it; yet while it potentially estranges us from the theatrical world of the play, it also strengthens our engagement with the characters that inhabit it – like Macbeth, we must ask 'whence is that knocking?', sharing both his ignorance about the location (and the agent) of the knock, and his uncomfortable sense of its probable consequences.

The audience responses in our workshop supported De Quincey's reading of the knock: they commented that it 'makes you visualise the threat of discovery', and the 'real noise' of the knocking is therefore 'shocking to the audience'. Another participant suggested that the '(awake) world disturbs the action inside the castle which has been dark and secretive'. With the help of our director Philip Bird 'playing' Macduff by knocking backstage, we experimented with various volumes, locations and timbres of knocks. One participant commented that 'distant and then close knocking really gave a sense of the size and depth of the castle', and another agreed that 'it is effective to feel it becoming closer and louder ... further away, it gives a sense of space ... the final knocking really did make me jump'. Audience members identified the knocking as coming from 'the south gates', because Lady Macbeth 'identified the source for us'. The knocking uses what we imagine about the world offstage to 'reflect back' on the world onstage: on Lady Macbeth's desire for concealment, and Macbeth's discovery of the indelible nature of his guilt.

When we transition to the 'porter scene', the knocking is, in the spatial logic of the scene, suddenly nearer to the character onstage (and therefore to the audience): the 'south entry' is now the door that the Porter guards. In this transition between scenes, some audience members commented that they were suddenly aware not of the castle, but of the theatrical architecture: 'a convincing offstage sound suddenly, jarringly became a

recognisable theatrical sound effect'. The offstage noise at once reinforces the correspondences between the Macbeths' castle and theatrical architecture, as it conjures up the offstage spaces of the castle and the world beyond, and disrupts it, reminding the audience of the offstage places in which the sound effect is produced. It can shatter the illusion of murderers conspiring, returning the audience to the world of the theatre, or it can reinforce the sense that we are in the Macbeth's castle, and make the audience complicit in the unfolding action. As we might expect, then, our workshop audience's experiences of the knock were diverse and multiple, but all shared De Quincey's sense of transformed space and time engendered by the knock.

In the play as a whole, as Evelyn Tribble suggests, this knock becomes a key part of an offstage soundscape – the bell, the knock, and the 'cry within of women' on the death of Lady Macbeth – which 'functions as an interpretative framework for the text' (77-8). We suggest that this interpretative framework of offstage sound shapes the audience's understanding of time and space. This soundscape is non-verbal, and in occurring offstage prompts interpretation onstage: from Macbeth's reading of the bell as a portent of Duncan's death and Lady Macbeth's identification of the knocking 'at the south entry', to the wordless 'cry within of women' which must be interpreted (onstage) in order to be understood as a response to the (offstage) death of Lady Macbeth. In *Macbeth*, offstage sounds threaten narrative revelation and draw attention to the audience's own processes of interpretation and understanding. In contrast, the cry within of a woman in *Othello* becomes an interruption, but also perhaps an escalation, of an onstage death which the audience and characters alike struggle to comprehend.

### **3. Interruption and Escalation: Emilia's Offstage Call in *Othello***

*Othello* presents an offstage sound effect that disrupts not only the space, but the time, of the onstage world. In 5.2, Emilia, projecting her voice on to the stage, is literally in between the offstage and onstage worlds of the play, there but not there, as a disembodied aural presence. She creates a sense of temporal as well as spatial liminality, as her calling disrupts our trajectory toward the climactic moment of Desdemona's death. In this scene, we see the moments before, the moment of, and the moments following Desdemona's murder bleed into each other: it is a scene in which, as a result

of Emilia's offstage presence, the audience simultaneously experience time as both contracted and protracted.<sup>4</sup>

Othello begins 5.2 by establishing the temporal and narrative arc through which Iago has convinced him of the need for Desdemona's death. He conjures 'the cause', the grounds for his murderous action: 'she with Cassio hath the act of shame | A thousand times committed' (5.2.1, 5.2.2018-19). It is these multiple imagined instances of adultery for which he now must be revenged on his wife. Othello moves swiftly to seize the moment and enact his revenge: in response to Desdemona's plea for a thirty-minute reprieve, he proclaims that 'Being done, there is no pause' (5.2.90). Yet there is pause in this scene, which multiplies and therefore draws out and delays the climactic moment of Desdemona's death, in the same way that Othello multiplies the climactic moments of her suspected adultery. Desdemona is potentially smothered twice and 'dies' three times in the space of forty lines, complicating the teleology that drives both Othello and the audience from the imagined 'cause' toward the kairotic 'now' of revenge, both of which in fact proliferate in this play. It is Emilia's offstage presence during the scene – her calling from outside of the bedchamber – that confuses our perception of the moment before, the moment of, and the moment after the act of revenge itself, moments that we explored in our Research in Action workshop.

During the rehearsal for the workshop, the director and actors felt that Emilia's presence was a disruptive one, as she interrupts Othello's murderous action. Othello is smothering Desdemona when Emilia's calling at the door distracts him and prevents him from suffocating her effectively:

OTHELLO                   It is too late.  
                              *He smothers her*  
EMILIA (*at the door*) My lord, my lord, what ho, my lord, my lord!  
OTHELLO What noise is this? Not dead? Not yet quite dead?  
                              I that am cruel am yet merciful.  
                              I would not have thee linger in thy pain.  
                              So. So. (5.2.92-98)

The actors felt that Othello is taken out of the moment by Emilia's calls from offstage, and that he must block out her voice and turn back to Desdemona so he can finish the job in hand. Unlike in *Macbeth*, here the offstage sound is understood as preventing the

---

<sup>4</sup> David Scott Kastan defined the time of the tragedies as 'linear and terrifyingly closed', however in both *Macbeth* and *Othello* that sense of finality is, in many ways, evasive (31).

murder from happening, rather than threatening to expose the fact that it has already taken place. In this reading of the scene, Emilia's presence offstage works to prolong the moment of the murder, at least in Othello's mind. However, there are some similarities between Emilia's calling and the knocking in *Macbeth*. Both work to confirm the spatial boundaries of the play worlds. Whereas in *Macbeth*, the dialogue of the scene combined with the knocking creates the specificities of the castle's architecture in the minds of the audience, in *Othello*, Emilia's calling from her position outside of the room may not give us much of a sense of the building the characters occupy, but it does confirm her social and gendered status within the world of the play. One audience member said they imagined Emilia calling from 'A socially segregated outer space – the boundary is more than physical'. It is her intrusion, both as a lower status member of the household and as a woman, which threatens Othello's patriarchal dominance as master of the house.

In their questionnaire responses, our audience generally expressed frustration toward Emilia as a disruptive force on the threshold of the scene, but in surprisingly contradictory ways. For some of the audience members, frustration arose because Emilia's presence could potentially save Desdemona but ultimately fails to do so. One audience member suggested that Emilia's calling at the door 'heightens the tension a lot, and makes the moment frustrating because we know Emilia's information could save Desdemona's life'. Emilia's presence offers the possibility of justice, as another audience member suggested, she 'gives the audience hope that the action will be interrupted – the rage will be replaced with sense – [which] makes the death more tragic'. As Lorna Hutson has suggested, 'the conjectural *space* behind a door becomes analogous to the *temporal* "conjecture and anxiety about the future"'. We imagine Emilia standing outside the bedchamber door, and we pin our anxious hopes for Desdemona's survival on her ability to cross that threshold.

However, for another group of audience members, Emilia's calling was frustrating because it delayed the murder itself. One commented that Emilia's voice 'intrudes on an incredibly intimate moment', another that she 'interrupts the private scene', and a third that her presence is a 'huge injection of jeopardy!' For these audience members, Emilia becomes a 'female obstracter'; her presence delays Othello's action, which is not only conceived of as violent, but also figured as sexual (both 'intimate' and 'private') (Parker, 13). One audience member commented that a sense of urgency was created by Emilia's interruptions, and that they felt 'frustration at her not coming in and preventing the murder'. However, several more audience members felt the sense of

urgency was generated by the fact that Emilia's presence raised 'the possibility that Othello might not kill Desdemona', and another that urgency is generated by the 'offstage calling', causing them to feel that Othello has 'got to get her murdered before Emilia enters'. In our workshop discussion, it was clear that for a large proportion of the audience, Emilia is an intruder whom they want to silence so they can watch the murder being carried out in peace. The calling, therefore, works to force us to side with Othello in this moment, and to regard Emilia as a representative of the figure of the female obstructor of masculine sexual and social fulfilment.

Yet it is also Emilia's presence which drives the audience and Othello toward the completion of the task in hand – Emilia simultaneously disrupts the violence on stage, and pushes it forward to its inevitable conclusion, as the catalyst for Desdemona's death (which she has unwittingly been, in fact, for most of the play). In the workshop we used the Folio version of this scene, which omits one key line that is present in the 1622 Quarto, Desdemona's 'O Lord! Lord! Lord!', which comes just before we first hear Emilia's similarly repeated calls of 'My lord!' (M2<sup>r</sup>, 5.2.83). As Harley Granville-Barker suggests, this line from the quarto can work to merge the voices of the two female characters: the line is 'Desdemona's agonized cry to God, and as the sharp sound of it is slowly stifled, Emilia's voice at the door rising through it, using the same words in another sense. A macabre duet' (122). Güçbilmez argues that:

A voiceless body is acceptable as silence, but a 'bodyless' voice – especially when presented in a theatre art which defines itself through mere presence – is completely uncanny (155).

The uncanniness of this moment is strengthened by the fact that we are confused by what we see and hear – a voiceless body seems to have a voice, and a bodyless voice seems to have a body. Ironically, then, it is when their voices merge, and when we are, as a result, made most aware of their connection as two women similarly abused by jealous husbands, that their separation is ensured, for it is potentially in this moment when Othello hears Emilia's call that Desdemona's fate is sealed. Could Othello mistake Emilia's voice for Desdemona's, continuing his attack with a renewed vigour as a result? Although we did not use this quarto line in the workshop itself, one audience member, positioned in the upper gallery, commented that it was hard to distinguish between the voices of Emilia and Desdemona at this moment in the scene. Emilia's calling, then, potentially both interrupts the murder, and yet simultaneously speeds

Othello in his work. In this moment, Emilia is both Desdemona's ally and her enemy, as she has been throughout the play, and this complexity, as our workshop suggested, evokes a sense of moral ambiguity for the play's audience.

Our reading of this most famous of dramatic moments, inspired by feedback from workshop audiences, challenges readings and performances of the play that suggest Emilia's presence offstage in this scene signals the beginning of the end of the tragedy. For example, in Honigmann's Arden 3 edition at line 85, 'What noise is this? Not dead? not yet quite dead?', we are given the following note: '[i]n some productions Emilia knocks on the door, with an effect like that of the 'knocking at the gate in *Macbeth*' (see De Quincey's famous essay)' (5.2.85n). Honigmann refers to De Quincey in order to suggest that Emilia's calling (and, perhaps, knocking) works to pull the audience and Othello out of the other-worldliness, the other-timeliness, that defines his mental state in this scene, and to some extent, in the play as a whole. However, as we have seen, for our audience in the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse, and in our readings of the play, Emilia's presence does not signal the end of action, rather, it either offers hope of preventing the inevitable action from taking place, or urges us and Othello towards its grim conclusion.

We were surprised by the audience's frustration with Emilia for interrupting the violence on stage; however, to a certain extent, this response to the scene should be expected. After all, for a majority of audience members, Desdemona's fate is sealed before they even enter the theatre. The inevitability of Desdemona's death is the result of the audience's prior knowledge not only of Shakespeare's plot, but of the temporal conventions of revenge: we are urged forward toward the moment of revengeful action – the moment that will balance out the incident of injury that has inspired the revengeful quest – and any disruption of that progress proves frustrating. What we found particularly interesting was that to differing degrees, these audience members were made uncomfortable by the fact that they felt impatient hostility toward Emilia. They recognised and condemned Emilia as a delayer of male action, but at the same time they felt ill at ease because the action she delays is the murder of an innocent woman. In this scene, therefore, audience members are simultaneously embedded within the world of the play, within the conventions of revenge tragedy (see Lewis), and yet also extracted from them: they know they should not feel impatient with Emilia, and the fact that they do potentially forces them to consider their acceptance of the stereotype of female inaction which creates women as obstructers of male authority. This scene, which merges off and onstage worlds, embeds the audience within this suspenseful moment,



but also pulls them out of the world of the play to a place of critical distance, from where they are able to reflect on the generic conventions of the drama itself and the culturally constructed nature of the temporally defined identities it presents.

Our workshop suggested the extent to which the audience's experience of offstage worlds involves a complex interplay between engagement with the imaginative extension of the onstage world backstage, and a meta-theatrical awareness of the artificiality of the offstage sound effect. This experience reveals an awareness of the potential for conflict at the liminal moment of the sound effect; a liminality which held the audience between the desire for delay, and the desire for narrative and generic fulfilment. In *Macbeth*, wanting to suspend the action that is threatened by the knocking suggests complicity with the criminals, while an eagerness for the entry that the knocking prefigures involves willing the unfolding of the tragedy; in *Othello*, the hope for the possible delay of Othello's murderous action which Emilia's calling inspires focuses the audience's attention on the possible salvation of Desdemona, while the compulsion toward generic fulfilment (as well as the knowledge of how this most tragic of plays must end) requires the death of an innocent woman. As De Quincey puts it, offstage sound effects 'reflect back' on the world of the play (and the emotional experience of the audience), shaping a complex emotional landscape of imaginative engagement and critical distance, complicity and empathy; knocking and calling draw attention to the edges of the stage world, heightening and disrupting the audience's awareness of time's passing or suspension, and therefore allowing a 'new world' to 'step in' (394).

#### Works cited

De Quincey, Thomas, 'On the knocking at the gate in *Macbeth*', in *The Collected Works of Thomas De Quincey*, 14 vols, vol. 10, ed by David Masson (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1890), pp. 389-94.

Dustagheer, Sarah Oliver Jones, and Eleanor Rycroft (eds), '(Re)constructed Spaces for Early Modern Drama: Research in Practice', *Shakespeare Bulletin* 35.2 (Summer 2017), 173-86.

Fitzpatrick, Tim, *Playwright, Space and Place in Early Modern Performance* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2011)

Granville-Barker, Harley, *Prefaces to Shakespeare: Othello* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1945).

Güçbilmez, Beliz, 'An Uncanny Theatricality: the Representation of the Offstage', *New Theatre Quarterly* 23.2 (May 2007), 152-60.

Heron, Jonathan, 'Shakespearean Laboratories and Performance-as-Research' in *Shakespeare on the University Stage* ed by Andrew Hartley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp.232-49.

Hutson, Lorna, 'Debt and Doorways in Renaissance Comedy', unpublished paper given at the UCL Centre for Early Modern Exchanges Seminar, 1 Nov 2017. Cited with permission of the author.

Kastan, David Scott, *Shakespeare and the Shapes of Time* (London: Macmillan, 1982).

Kesson, Andy, 'Acting out of Character: A Performance-as-Research Approach to The Three Ladies of London', in *Performance as Research in Early English Theatre Studies: The Three Ladies of London in Context* (Hamilton: McMaster University, 2015).

Lewis, Sarah, *Time and gender in Shakespearean Drama and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

Menzer, Paul (ed.), 'Afterword: Discovery Spaces?', *Inside Shakespeare: Essays on the Blackfriars Stage*, (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 2006), pp. 223-30.

Parker, Patricia, *Literary fat ladies: rhetoric, gender, property* (London: Methuen, 1987).

Purcell, Stephen, *Shakespeare and Audience in Practice* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

Purcell, Stephen, 'Practice-as-Research and Original Practices', *Shakespeare Bulletin* 35.3 (Fall 2017), 425-443.

Shakespeare, William, *The tragedy of Othello, the Moore of Venice* (London, 1622).

Shakespeare, William, *Othello*, ed by E. A. J. Honigmann (Bloomsbury: Arden Shakespeare, 2016).

Smith, Bruce, *The Acoustic World in Early Modern England* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999).

Smith, Bruce, 'Within, Without, Withinwards: The Circulation of Sound in Shakespeare's Theatre' in *Shakespeare's Theatres and the Effects of Performance* ed. Farah Karim-Cooper and Tiffany Stern (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2013), pp.171-194.

Sarah Lewis and Emma Whipday

Smith, Simon, *Musical Response in the Early Modern Playhouse, 1603–1625* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

Sprague, Arthur Colby, 'Off-Stage Sounds', *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 15.1 (October 1945), 70-75.

Tribble, Evelyn, "'When Every Noise Appalls Me': Sound and Fear in *Macbeth* and Akira Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood*", *Shakespeare*, 1:1-2 (2005), 75-90.

Whipday, Emma, *Shakespeare's Domestic Tragedies: Violence in the Early Modern Home* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).